

Cairo

August 28, 2010

I have been in love with you since you bought those shoes in Cairo exactly 1,077 days ago.

I always wanted to ask you about your life in between and around the times we were together. I want to know you, between the folds where no one looks to find you. I always found it fateful that we met through work because that was the only hinge keeping my marriage together.

Bridget hired us. I met her as an undergraduate at Boston University-- she wanted to be a photographer and I wanted to write. We both failed. While I was out, trying to be someone I was not, Bridget gave up her camera and started Archer Books funded by an art gallery, publishing books of photography. I wouldn't have been able to take it if hadn't been for Mark, who also found a job nearby. I loved that job more than I loved him, more than I loved the implications of the word "us".

Once I admitted to myself that my marriage had deteriorated into what was now only a useful accessory (something like a bottle opener), a mound of trivial things in my life came to mind. Like our couch.

Our amaranthine couch was tacky and the faux Persian rug we bought for fun was stupid. The rug contrasted with the cheap-looking couch we'd fished from the street while dumpster-diving. When we found it, Eucalyptus leaves had fallen on it and it reeked of patchouli oil. That was always the wonderfully quaint thing about our neighborhood-- it was three successive blocks packed with apartment buildings. Tenants moved in and out constantly and no one was rich. I'm sure all furniture had travelled around those blocks many times. I often wondered about their stories.

The couch was us: it was a vagrant thing going nowhere in particular and with no end in which to settle. Threads were starting to unravel because the cat liked to use it as his scratching post. The cushions sagged uncomfortably low.

Once, when we made love by the couch, on the faux Persian rug, I only came when I thought of you, not him-- which surprised me. He whispered I love you, in my ear and I remember thinking, as my breath and heart rate returned to normal, how grateful I was that it hadn't cost anything. I fell asleep in the crook of his neck, my hand on his heart, still beating hard.

Working for Bridget let me get away from the stuffy third-floor apartment that trapped uncomfortably hot air during the sunny weather. I liked meeting the people, the photographers they commissioned and the proposals they had.

Meanwhile, Bridget's staff was walking in and out of that office as the merger was underway, sitting among us, smiling as if they were trying to ease the pain of having our jobs pulled out from underneath us.

I think it was supposed to be a consolation when they said they wanted us involved for the publication of the first book under the new company. I guess they were being nice, letting us hire someone freelance and not one of them. That freelance person turned out to be you. Bridget said you set the standard. You didn't know anyone other than her, but you weren't shy. I hated that at first. I resented you because even though you weren't one of *them*, you were still helping make a book that meant *The End*.

I didn't want to be an imprint of another company, or of someone else.

We had made small talk before-- you told me about Kentucky, how you got rid of your accent, about the first photography class you took in college and how the instructor wore large browline glasses that got in the way every time he held up a camera.

When we boarded the airplane together, that was still all I knew about you.

The six of us- me, Bridget, you, the other two photographers: Ramin and Nola; and Todd, the project manager- met up at the terminal. It was 6AM because our flight was scheduled to leave at 8AM and it was cold outside so we all wore thick wool coats that we knew we'd have to take off once we landed in Egypt.

We were seated next to each other on the way there, canned into the center with everyone ten rows behind us. I am a nervous flyer-- you realized that when I put my head in my lap as we took off.

Try to sleep, you told me. Once the seatbelt sign was turned off and we were allowed to order drinks, I knew I would be ok. Alcohol usually puts me to sleep.

You had a V8 tomato juice which inspired me to order a Bloody Mary even though I don't even like Bloody Marys. I drink during flights because I have to.

This was really the first time you and I were alone. I got drunk off of one and a half drinks. I didn't want to be that person who gets sick on the plane and stinks up the cabin with the smell of vomit and thanks to you I wasn't. It might sound weird, but you just rubbing my arm made me feel better. Any other circumstances would have made it weird since I was married but me being sick made it different. From that moment on, I felt like we had passed into some territory where we could ignore my marital status. Before I got drunk, you asked whether Mark was also a bad flyer (he's not-- he mocks my fear) and that was the last time we ever mentioned him.

We were so jet-lagged when we arrived, we fled sluggishly through the terminals of Cairo International and waited for Ramin-- who knew Arabic-- to call a cab company. We'd seen the city from the plane, drenched in smog, emanating a dim, orange glow.

For the next few days, we trekked around the city. After a day of shooting, we went to a hookah bar that someone's friend had said was good. it turned out to be a hot tourist spot and we as twenty-somethings- some of us close to thirty- became aware of our age as we passed around the hookah and blew whiffs of passionfruit smoke.

We were in a different world-- one where we could get drunk together, smoke hookah, and forget that we were trapped in a different life.

You carried a camera with you at all times during the trip with lenses that must've amounted to thousands of dollars.

You took to drinking Egyptian-style coffee, brewed five times over, strong and distinct. You woke early every day, took a taxicab to the site and surveyed and experimented before any of us got there. You would adjust the shutter and the filter and change the lens a thousand times. Everything you did was deliberate.

When we were touring, not working on the book, you used an old and heavy analog film camera that you said was from the GDR. You tucked it carefully behind your arm, strap over one shoulder. You had a penchant for carrying loose film in your pockets and I could hear the rolls bouncing up against each other as you walked. You were so good at taking candid pictures of us that I never even caught you.

I would hear you wind the film-- the camera was so old that after every picture you had to wind it- and once when I looked up, after hearing the clicking sound of the

film, you were looking down at your camera and I wondered if you had taken a picture of me.

I imagine that you were a precocious child. I have invented a history for you-- I imagine that it started with the first disposable camera your father bought for you back when disposable cameras were a novelty.

I made that up.

But I actually found out real things about you, mostly during the cab and bus rides-- for instance, when we went to Alexandria. You told me your name wasn't short for anything. In college, you were supposed to study economics but instead of doing homework for statistics and taking other math classes, you went out at all hours of the night taking pictures or studying photography books.

The last week of our trip began to culminate into something just as the weather took a strange turn-- the hot arid climate that choked us suddenly cooled.

It happened on the most overcast day of our trip when we were driving back to Cairo from Alex. We hadn't expected to stop but the rental car broke down because no one had thought to change the oil and so the hydraulic valves had failed. No one could figure out how to fix it so we tried to get a hold of a mechanic or anyone who could help us. We had just passed Digwa, where the streets were unpaved, made of chalky dust that never settled, even in the humidity.

Some of us were tired of waiting so we drifted off in different directions, walking along the coastline of the wide tributaries of the Nile. You took your camera and caught up to me.

Then you and I found the beach. Somehow I could tell it was there because the pungent odor of the sea rolled over us and we went about finding a way down to the shore. The briny wind from the waves was rushing towards our eager open eyes.

You told me that you'd always wanted to find a place that no one had ever been to before, and we strode down to the shore and took off our sandals to stand in the water and let it rise to our calves.

It began to rain tiny drops that were so indistinct they felt like a wet jet of air passing slowly over us. I waded away from the water.

That was unexpected, you said. We were standing meters apart and we started walking toward each other. The sand was so fine that it was hard to walk because my feet kept sinking. As it became wet, it clumped between my toes.

You took out your camera, snapped a picture of me, and dropped the camera, leaving it swinging on the strap around your neck. I was standing almost right in front of you then.

It happened suddenly, but I knew it was going to happen-- you kissed me.

Then we left the beach and walked back to the car. We held hands shyly like children until we could see everybody else again. In the taxicab that picked us up, we sat next to each other and you let me take pictures with your camera. I felt inadequate trying to focus the lens in the half-light of the backseat.

My heart was still racing; I could feel it pulsing to the tips of my hand—the one you had held only moments ago.

I never asked you how those pictures came out.

I have been in love with you since you bought those shoes in Cairo 1,077 days ago. It was the fact of why you bought them- at the very last possible moment the day we were scheduled to leave. Almost too late.

Your sandals had been falling apart for days, we all told you- buy new ones from the street vendors. You couldn't speak Arabic and you didn't want anyone else to do it for you so you did it in secret. Except me- you told me and I felt special. Let's go, you said, but I stayed because I wanted it to be something to do for yourself and I think that's what you wanted too-- you only asked me because I was the one who finally convinced you. So I stayed on my cot early that morning when you left. But the truth is, I followed you, trailing behind you like a thief.

You approached a woman who wore a scarf on her head and a plastic glove on one hand. Her feet were covered under her long dress. It felt odd to buy shoes from someone whose feet you couldn't see, but I don't think you cared. I watched you from around the corner, I was pretending to stroll, trying so hard not to look like a vulnerable woman- a lost lover.

You yourself never looked like that. Your skin- tanned and particular. It wasn't old, but your face looked as if you'd been places. You were never going to be the target of a young boy street pickpocket. You blended in until you tried English on the woman. She looked at you, almost angry, I think-- I don't think anyone in Egypt liked Americans- - but I was too far away to see her face; I could only make out the outlines of her mouth and the folds around it. She was not smiling.

You pointed at your feet and lifted one up, the sole was dangling, about to fall off. She suddenly laughed and nodded. She picked around on the tilted shelf that she placed her shoes on and gestured at your foot. You took off your shoe and she began to take shoes from her store and measure them sole to sole. She'd look at you, waiting for your approval. You shook your head twice then pointed to another pair of shoes, but she shook her head when the soles didn't match length. Finally you bought the first pair she had offered you. You put them on and gave her money, left one of the shoes, but you kept the one where the sole was coming off. I tell myself a story-- that you kept it because you wanted to remember the place where you had worn them out.

Later that day, you returned. I had run back to the house-- I didn't want you to know that I'd followed you. I felt that I had intruded on your life and watched you-- been a voyeur to what you thought had been a private moment; one that belonged to you and only you. But I had made you share it with me. I lay on my cot until you came back.

I remember showering shortly before we left for the airport. I was looking at the molded grout lining the tub. I felt the water running down my body in rivulets, circling into the grimy drain, washing away a kind of resolution.

We went to the airport after that-- all of us and had a laugh about your shoes.

They stamped my passport and I thought of you. I was excited when we landed back in San Francisco. Excited for them to check my passport again because I wanted to look at the stamp from Cairo again. I looked at the stamp on the page, looked at you, and you smiled.

Yesterday you contacted the Pittsburgh office and asked for me. They wouldn't give you my direct line, but the secretary wrote me a memo with your number. I should be honest, staring at the memo, imagining your handwriting, I didn't know whether I was going to return your call or not. But I called you anyway and we said we'd meet on Beechwood Boulevard.

Everything leading up to our encounter was fraught with tension. It was a hot day and the air was bloated with humidity. The air was so thick I found my lungs heavy from trying to breathe. We went to a cafe that turned out to have no air conditioning but at least we were in the shade.

You told me you had left the contract and did only freelance photography now. You had time to travel.

I wondered, you wondered—just as we had on the beach—where are we?
Where were we three years ago?

As you stepped into my musty apartment, you suddenly smelled like a foreigner. I'd forgotten how you smelled. There was still that faint scent of pepper on your clothes. I still imagine you loading your washing machine and strewing pepper in with detergent.

As I walked you to the door, you procured a candid picture of me from your pocket. It was a photo of me in Cairo, wrinkled with water damage.

I know what's going to happen. You are going to finish reading this, immediately get out paper, and you'll want to respond.

You'll write me a reply, but you won't mail it.

Because you tell yourself that to write to me is to follow me.

And you are not someone who follows.

And because you are the first to realize that we are buried. Buried under all the time and secrets passed over the sand of the Cairene beaches.